

## **Formations, Institutions and The “Free Theatre”: Edith Craig’s Pioneer Players 1911-25**

In ‘Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism’ (1977), Raymond Williams provided valuable insights into the vibrant and volatile period in theatre when ideas of freedom and oppression were realized and contested in the dramatic form of naturalism. He noted that the naturalist play emphasised ‘the stage as an enclosed room’ and environment itself acted as an agent in constructing character.<sup>1</sup> Some naturalist drama sought to open up these claustrophobic domestic spaces and indicate pathways to social change. However, any depiction of a domestic space or ‘enclosed room’ in this period—in plays, short stories, novels and the visual art of the women’s suffrage political campaigns—became inevitably implicated in separate spheres ideology.<sup>2</sup> Although Williams referred to the ‘breakaway independent theatres’ and the Vedrenne-Barker season of plays 1904-07, he did not mention the involvement of female performers, authors or directors in the promotion of the independent theatres or how they drew on that experience during the political movement for women’s enfranchisement. The ‘enclosed room’ of the naturalist play was reconceptualized by a new generation of political activists of both sexes who envisaged equality symbolized by citizenship and brought about by legislative change.

The women’s suffrage movement was very visibly and successfully supported by the production of politically engaged drama. This is marked by a specific theatrical production, Elizabeth Robins’ *Votes for Women* (1907) and the founding of the specialist institutions, the Actresses’ Franchise League (AFL, 1908) and the Pioneer Players theatre society (1911). As one of the principal directors of women’s suffrage drama and founder of the Pioneer Players, Edith Craig (1869-1947) was at the centre of this engine for change.<sup>3</sup> She emphasized her preference for working freely with many organizations including both the AFL and the Pioneer Players. This method of working exemplified the dynamic influences of cultural

formations as described by Williams who warned against too narrow a view: '[...] if we deduce significant cultural relations from the study of institutions alone, we shall be in danger of missing some important cases in which cultural organization has not been, in any ordinary sense, institutional'.<sup>4</sup> With membership lists and annual reports, some of the independent theatre societies documented their operation as institutions but they were fostered and promoted by informal and somewhat *ad hoc* cultural formations comprised of diverse communities with sometimes contradictory values and allegiances. Williams' essay 'The Bloomsbury Fraction' (1980) offers a way of understanding these less formally organized cultural groupings and the fluid and ephemeral social interactions which underpinned them.<sup>5</sup> His emphasis is on the eclectic interests of the Bloomsbury Group and Leonard Woolf's insistence on the friendship and the social aspects of their interactions.

It is Williams' acute observations about the influence of these informal social formations that now provide a means of further understanding the London-based Pioneer Players and its director, Edith Craig. Williams' essays offer an insight into ways in which freedom was understood, what dramatic forms it took and what licence was given to articulate challenges relating to the prevailing 'social environment'. Williams' analysis of the 'Bloomsbury fraction' is applicable to the Pioneer Players theatre society and the contradictions and conflicts arising from the Pioneer Players' diverse constituency. It was vulnerable in various ways; its reactive mode and venueless status limited the number of productions. The annual programme was characterized by single performances of plays, which only very occasionally were repeated. The dependence on venues becoming available to them also created difficulties, given the different acting spaces and facilities especially in public halls. This fluidity lent itself to an aesthetic of the *ad hoc*. However, resistant to the rootedness of established commercial theatre enterprises, the Pioneer Players was free to venture into forbidden territory. As an institution supported by complementary cultural

formations, the Pioneer Players society operated in a highly adaptable and resourceful way. In 1914, they staged *Idle Women* by Magdalen Ponsonby; a typical, one-off production, this was notable for its metatheatrical features which reflected the problems of organizing cultural and political events. The play exposed the prevailing responsiveness to a fashionable orientalism such as had motivated the Dreadnought Hoax incident (1910) (discussed briefly below) and the interest in Eastern religions informing Theosophy. The Pioneer Players used humour to consolidate group identity. Rather than in any way 'idle', the members were self-consciously active in their engagement with a variety of social reforms and political movements.

Instead of making a claim simply to readjust the spotlight on Edith Craig and the theatre society she founded, this article follows Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (2005) and Marvin Carlson (2013) in exploring the extent to which this inattention is symptomatic of a more widespread omission of drama and performance from literary studies of this period, creating a peculiarly lopsided view of the cultural landscape which extends globally.<sup>6</sup> The consequence of the omission is that it ignores the way in which many modernists experimented in various media, forms and venues. George Bernard Shaw, who rated Craig's directorial work highly, remarked on the centrality of theatre to the cultural life of the middle classes in that it had almost replaced the church as an institution attracting regular attendance.<sup>7</sup> The 'free theatre' movement tended to be concerned with the performance of scripted plays in theatre venues for an audience of subscribing members. These productions therefore claimed to be private; they attempted to avoid the censorship which was implemented by the licensing mechanism of the Lord Chamberlain's office. Although the most well-known 'free theatre' societies in Britain operated in London, attempts to create a 'free theatre' were restricted neither to London nor Britain. In 1919, inspired by post-war regeneration ideologies, the British Drama League was founded, with Edith Craig as one of its leaders. It aimed to promote amateur

theatre throughout 'Britain' by which it meant to propagate metropolitan concerns to locations outside London. Similarly theatrical and cultural institutions such as the British Empire Shakespeare Society and English Speaking Union led cultural missions to the suburbs and regions inculcating an Englishness designed to strengthen post-war national identity.

The theatre and performance work associated with Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players involved diverse activities and relationships: formal transactions and contractual arrangements; patronage and nepotism; the informal, unpaid and the voluntary. In borrowed theatres and rented public halls, performances were given of scripted or improvised drama or dance and, on occasions, music or lectures. The more experimental and innovative work often brought together professionals and amateurs, giving rise to potential conflicts and tensions eased by means of subsidies and *pro bono* terms. The cast lists of some of these productions demonstrate that the performers were drawn from diverse social groups. Middle-class and aristocratic youth sometimes tested their acting talents and most likely the patience of their disapproving parents by taking part in one-off theatrical productions.

### **'The Bloomsbury Fraction' and the Bedford Street Flat**

The innovative work of the Pioneer Players was driven by a committed and ambitious leadership. It drew its membership from wide social and political networks. Its success was largely attributable to the leadership and talents of Edith Craig. However, Raymond Williams' analysis of the 'Bloomsbury Fraction' prompts closer consideration of the cultural hinterlands of the Pioneer Players institution. Unlike the Pioneer Players, the Bloomsbury Group was not a club or society to which one could apply for membership. In 'The Bloomsbury Fraction' (1980), Raymond Williams established the various misunderstandings about the way in which the so-called 'Bloomsbury Group' gathered, grouped and re-grouped and the sense of 'social conscience' that characterized it (155). Williams notes that even

those at the centre failed to acknowledge the interconnectedness of cultural practices and powerful social influences. Thus Leonard Woolf emphasised the friendship of those involved, and the social aspect of their gatherings. This rendered opaque the exclusive cultural formation, a ‘fraction’ of a class as Williams describes it. Williams’ conceptualization of a ‘fraction’ could be further developed to engage with the intersectional aspects of these groups in which social class was one of a number of different imbricated positions.<sup>8</sup> A similar cultural formation developed in Edith Craig’s circle at 31 Bedford Street, Covent Garden in central London and later at Priest’s House, Tenterden, Kent.<sup>9</sup> Theatre practitioners, women’s suffrage activists, social reformers, anti-censorship campaigners, artists, writers, musicians, journalists, and aristocrats were drawn to the flat where Craig lived with her female partners, Christopher St John and, from 1916, Tony Atwood, connecting with an emerging lesbian, gay and queer subculture.<sup>10</sup> The Bedford Street flat became the temporary headquarters of the International Suffrage Shop and in 1911 it was the official address of the Pioneer Players theatre society.

It is Raymond Williams’ conceptualization of cultural activities, in terms of institutions and formations, which provides a framework for understanding the complex dynamics of social and cultural practices—the small scale, the ephemeral and the marginal—at work in the Pioneer Players. A similarly acute sensitivity is at work in his conceptualization of the dynamic relationships between dominant, residual and emergent forms.<sup>11</sup> The emergent form is most closely associated with modernism but the serious conflicts underlying the emergent dramatic forms and the nature of the challenges posed by those active in their creation and reception tend to be obscured unless these social practices are acknowledged and not reductively attributed to the illustrious named individuals involved.

In Williams' argument for theatre as a significant force in this period some problems in gender and identity emerge as significant players in the field of 'materialism and culture'. It has been widely noted that, in the plays produced by the 'free theatre' movement, women feature as characters who become the focus of a problem or crisis within an oppressive marriage: Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* was performed by André Antoine's Théâtre Libre (1887-94); Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, the latter performed in London by the Independent Theatre Society (1891-7). This aspect of the naturalist play, in its destabilization of gender, made for a particularly emergent form. Female performers found the motivation and opportunities to act, write, devise and stage unconventional characterizations of femininity. The wealth of achievement of these women has surfaced more recently in relation to studies concerned with the New Woman and the women's suffrage movement. Hitherto there had been a tendency to return repetitively to the familiar, male protagonists, such as Harley Granville Barker, John Galsworthy, and George Bernard Shaw. Raymond Williams, writing before Julie Holledge's groundbreaking study of the AFL and the Pioneer Players, notes:

Virtually all the important new work in European drama of this period was done in breakaway independent theatres, based on a minority (fractional) audience which separated itself at once from its own class and from the 'theatrical' integration. In England this minority was already large, in other fields but in the theatre it was slow to organize: The Dramatic Students (1866), the Independent Theatre Society (1891), the Stage Society (1899). But it was through these organizations that different work came into the theatres: Shaw's *Widower's Houses* at the Independent Theatre in 1892, the Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant; and ultimately the Vedrenne-Barker regime at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907 (Williams, 'Naturalism', 144).

Edith Craig had been involved in the Stage Society, credited as ‘Wardrobe Mistress’ but established herself as a director by founding the Pioneer Players theatre society, one of these ‘breakaway independent theatres’ whose ‘minority (fractional) audience’ was profoundly intersectional. Catering for theatre practitioners in its lower membership rates, it supported women’s suffrage, included men equally albeit in a minority in its membership and several of its leaders and authors were lesbian or gay. Some members of the Pioneer Players were to be involved in significant activities to professionalize, unionize, institutionalize and archive theatre work in Britain.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Free Theatre and Free Love Repercussions: The Theatrical Ladies Guild and the Single Mother**

In the period associated with modernism, the female performer who had followed the principles of the New Woman and Ibsen’s protagonists may have faced the very material problems of raising a child alone. From the 1890s to the interwar years, the theatre as an institution was the site of cultural innovation and political intervention. It attracted both amateur actors interested in performance as an entertainment for themselves and also trainee actors learning on the job and seeking a shop window for their talents. Health, appearance and reputation were highly valued criteria in casting roles. Securing employment often relied on patronage and recommendations. However, as a field of work, theatre was becoming unionized. It was also becoming professionalized, a landmark of which was the award of a knighthood in 1895 to Henry Irving, who thus became the first Knight of the British stage. Female performers faced a different set of problems and for those experiencing difficulties from intermittent employment, ill-health or single parenthood, help was discretely provided by informal, individual acts of support and institutionally organized charitable aid.<sup>13</sup> The need for this charitable assistance invites further consideration and indicates one way in which

female theatre practitioners experienced very different material circumstances compared with their male counterparts.

It is significant that Ellen Terry, the President of the Pioneer Players, was a public and private philanthropist, supporting female performers in this way.<sup>14</sup> The Pioneer Players theatre society publicly aligned itself with advocacy for single mothers in several controversial productions, one of which was written by the mother of Terry's grandchild: *The Surprise of His Life*, (produced in 1912). As Julie Holledge (1981) established, Edith Craig, the Pioneer Players and the AFL typified the politicization of women in the theatre by the women's suffrage movement.<sup>15</sup> They were involved in performances that demonstrated the breadth and relevance of the arguments for women's enfranchisement for the improvement of women's lives. Although women were not legally recognized as citizens, they were subject to the law and the women's suffrage arguments regularly exposed this, often identifying sensational examples of injustice. For example, one of the three plays produced by the Pioneer Players in the society's inaugural production concerned a complex and overlooked problem. *In the Workhouse* (1911) by Margaret Wynne Nevinson drew on the author's experiences as a Poor Law Guardian, as Holledge suggests.<sup>18</sup> The play detailed the deplorable *de facto* imprisonment in the workhouse imposed on an otherwise independent working-class woman because she was married to a destitute husband. However, given the insights from Ellen Terry's letters on charitable support of women working in the precarious field of employment in the theatre, it would have struck a special chord with the audience of members and it emphasised the Pioneer Players' position as advocates for legal reform to include women's rights as mothers and workers as well as citizens.

Theatre performances, especially those of the Pioneer Players, were used as a forum for political lobbying, notably against censorship and for women's suffrage but also less well-known campaigns such as vegetarianism, food reform and the promotion of the National



Insurance Act.<sup>19</sup> Herman Heijermans' *The Good Hope* focused on a female perspective on the brutal conditions experienced by a fishing community and provided an example of the kind of naturalism Williams described in his essay: closely linking character and environment, exposing the conditions of the lives lived and the actions determined by this environment.<sup>20</sup> Most of the Pioneer Players' productions were directed by Edith Craig; well received by critics in the UK and abroad, they were notable for their visually intriguing effects with the minimum of resources.

That Edith Craig's place in theatre history has been a shadowy, marginalized one is, I would argue, partly relatable to the 'problems' outlined by Williams several decades ago and which still persist. It arises from the preconception that art is an object and not a practice, whereby, in this case, theatrical performance is therefore reduced to the conservation and privileging of the published dramatic text. Once theatre work (performance before an invited audience) is appreciated as a social practice involving numerous individuals, complex elements and interactions, the idea of the 'art of the theatre' as an object must become redundant. If theatre history and literary studies overlook the gendered dimensions of the 'social being',<sup>20</sup> the achievements of female theatre practitioners and writers in this period tend to be unrecognized. Women were often at the centre of operations when the 'free' theatre was being organized, although the legal status of women meant that they were deprived of the franchise and conceptualized as the property of men. Moreover, the role of the theatre director was a newly emerging phenomenon; the director was the leading figure in control of all aspects of the production, aiming to create a coherent artistic whole. This new approach to theatre as an art form was notably theorized by Edith Craig's brother Edward Gordon Craig but successfully and extensively implemented by her. Her work was widely reviewed in the contemporary press, nationally and internationally, and it features in fleeting but decisive acknowledgements in theatrical and literary autobiographies. Subsequently the

part she played in the developments in twentieth-century theatre in Britain and as the principal director of women's suffrage drama in Britain has yet to receive its full recognition. Similarly, women's suffrage drama, and the way it was influenced by and reacted to cultural practices in other media and forms in the fertile modernist period, demands and is beginning to receive serious critical attention.

### **Problems of gender: 'the environment has soaked into their lives'**

Raymond Williams' understanding of the dynamic of cultural relationships provides a timely interpretative framework for a new British theatre history of this period that is open to the trans-disciplinary cultural practices that were not only vital to the most experimental and innovative work, but taken for granted at the time by their exponents. Although Raymond Williams's essay on naturalism does not address women's suffrage drama, what he has to say about environment and character is applicable to it and profoundly illuminating. Williams examines the conventions of naturalism in its association with a philosophical position of determinism, linking character to environment and inheritance and with an explicit and highly visible staging of a material world which envelops the individual, determining their consciousness. This is formulated by Williams in fluid, physical terms of osmosis or life force: 'Moreover the environment has soaked into their lives'.<sup>22</sup> Williams shows that naturalist drama rarely depicted an individual struggling within a restrictive and oppressive environment who then proceeds to escape, survive and transform that environment.<sup>23</sup> However, he emphasises the challenges posed within some naturalist drama in exposing the limitations imposed on the individual and thereby presenting a social critique.

In drama such as *Votes for Women* (1907) by Elizabeth Robins, and *How The Vote Was Won* (1909) by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St John, the naturalist dramatic form is employed in a critique of the oppressiveness of the private domestic sphere to which many

middle-class women were consigned. Women's suffrage dramatic plots often present a more radical development of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which concludes with Nora leaving her husband and family for a different future. The audience focuses on this individual woman's decision to leave her home. In the emergent and most radical forms within the extensive body of women's suffrage drama, the female characters are systematically always presented as individuals both politically active and effective as well as always already aware that they are supported by a politically committed collective; any focus on an individual protagonist emphasises how, as Williams states, the 'environment has soaked into their lives'.<sup>24</sup> It also emphasises the implications of the social environment that has determined her political awakening and activism and motivated her to work with other women and men. In an implied mobilization, which would most typically be associated with the drama of Bertolt Brecht, the action in these women's suffrage plays is decisive and promises social change as the audience is implicitly directed towards the unfolding political campaign off the stage. The open-endedness, rather than generating a sense of failure, fatalism or doubt, invites the audience actively to provide the resolution. The audience's involvement is usually implied rather than delivered through the kind of explicit declaration or imperative that would characterize the agit-prop of the later theatres of the Left.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Idle Women, Political Agency and Orientalist Performance***

Before the arguments about the vote could be won, other ideological battles had to be fought in different and very entrenched institutions. These included medical and scientific discourses with all the concomitant institutional weight of authority and extended to theories of biological essentialism and eugenics.<sup>26</sup> Eugenics in particular was powerful in its appeal to a broad political spectrum, and it featured explicitly as a topic of staged conversation between characters in some of the plays produced by the Pioneer Players. Anti-suffrage arguments

emphasised the inherent intellectual inferiority of women and their unsuitability for the responsibility of rational decision-making in the use of the vote. Eugenicist ideas informed the anti-suffragists' demonization of suffragists as degenerate and insane. I suggest therefore that the success of the women's suffrage campaign relied on clear-thinking women (and their male supporters) who were capable of decisive political action and this idea underpins the play, *Idle Women: A Study in Futility* by Magdalen Ponsonby, produced at the Little Theatre, London on 22 June 1914. The play demonstrates a knowingness in its self-referential humour and perhaps also a confidence in the Pioneer Players' identity as an organization, since it dared to stage a play about chaotic mismanagement. The production therefore served an important purpose: to unite the Pioneer Players' audience in laughing at the frivolity and lack of commitment of the characters in the play who are seen taking up numerous political and cultural issues in an incompetent and superficial way. These cultural practices are at work within both formal institutions and the looser cultural formations that envelop and interconnect them. However, the play mediates some contradictory impulses and ideological conflicts centring on the prevailing curiosity about the 'orient' and in this sense it seems to raise questions about the values shared by some members of the Pioneer Players' audience.

The author of *Idle Women* was well-placed to observe the behaviour of the aristocracy as her father had been Private Secretary to Queen Victoria.<sup>27</sup> This experience may have influenced her creation of the main protagonist, Lady Ditcham, who had formed an association to promote a new Buddhist religion named Bunginn-Ga, centred on Tanno Matsuri (a boy specifically designated as 'Chinese'). It is made explicit that this new religious association is one of many organizations that Lady Ditcham and her friends have taken up as a fad. The plot is reminiscent of the promotion by Annie Besant and by the Theosophical Society of the Indian spiritual leader, Krishnamurti (1895-1986). On his visit to Britain in 1911 he had been welcomed by the theosophists at Charing Cross railway station.<sup>28</sup>

In *Idle Women*, a telegraph messenger instead of Tanno Matsuri is mistakenly brought from the railway station to Lady Ditcham and her associates. The case of mistaken identity highlights the inauthenticity and incompetence of this group. The organizers purport to have serious political and philanthropic aims but instead use the organization as an excuse to socialize. In the dialogue, passing references are made to the campaign for women's suffrage, the popularity of the tango and the organization of a costume ball.

Both the Bloomsbury Group and the Pioneer Players themselves are possible referents in *Idle Women*. The mistaken identity plot and the use of an orientalist neologism (Bunginn-Ga), provide points of comparison with the Dreadnought Hoax in 1910 in which Horace de Vere Cole, Virginia Woolf and others impersonated the Emperor of Abyssinia and his entourage and tricked the navy at Paddington Station.<sup>29</sup> The designation of the new religion espoused by Tanno Matsuri as 'Bunginn-Ga' features similar reduplication as found in the phrase 'bunga bunga', attributed by *Daily Mail* journalists to the individuals dressed as Abyssinian princes and officials in the Dreadnought Hoax.<sup>30</sup> The orientalist disguise adopted in the Dreadnought Hoax was designed as an amusing deception at the expense of the British naval officials but served to reveal the values of the hoaxers.

### ***Kismet* Costumes and Harem Trousers at the Pioneer Players' Mi-Careme Ball**

In applying insights from Raymond Williams' analyses of the 'Bloomsbury fraction' and the dynamic process of cultural forms, this article proposes a new way of understanding the rationale for the Pioneer Players' eclectic choice of plays. The evidence is drawn from minor details about the diverse social and political engagements as well as the specific social events that are mentioned only in passing reference in the annual reports. The Pioneer Players' membership had been treated to two costume balls. The March 1914 costume ball in particular demands further exploration in relation to the production several months later of

*Idle Women*. The preoccupation with orientalism in this costume ball reflects the values of the diverse formations from which the Pioneer Players drew its membership. Guests at this most recent ball, at the Connaught Rooms in London, featured in photographs in the *Tatler* magazine (Fig 1). Their costumes suggest that the popular orientalist play, *Kismet*, was at least an unofficial theme of the ball. Stars of the play itself were included in these six photographs.<sup>31</sup>

The frisson generated by the possibility of performing the orient was a powerful aspect of the prevailing fantasies of the imperialist subject. A key text in this flourishing and highly lucrative enterprise was Richard Burton's *One Thousand and One Nights* (1885). In *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (2003), Edward Ziter notes that it was Burton's image of the East that dominated and became not only familiar but was propagated as authentic and authoritative. Of relevance to this analysis of *Idle Women* and the Pioneer Players' costume ball, are Ziter's remarks that Burton's research was obtained by disguising himself as a Muslim and that his book dwelt on 'the harem-abduction trope'.<sup>32</sup> As Inderpal Grewal has established with regard to empire and women's suffrage, individuals such as Annie Besant who supported women's suffrage and Indian independence and challenged colonialism also engaged in a 'problematic universalism'.<sup>33</sup> The name of the Pioneer Players theatre society itself similarly draws on the prevailing discourse of innovation and liberation and ambivalently draws authority from military occupation and colonialism but appropriates 'pioneer' for feminist and other social reformist projects. As Grewal notes:

Most of the 'pioneering' women (as the women travellers were often called) were supportive of the imperialist project; they called upon the same positive-negative dichotomy of masculine-feminine functions and abilities as did those who opposed granting English women any voting rights or any measure of equality. As a consequence, they did not extend their protest to a critique of industrial economy or

patriarchal systems, nor did many of them protest the interrelated notions of class and race hierarchies that supported the culture of colonialism in England. By retaining these hierarchies, and supporting the masculinist project of colonialism, the suffrage movement was able to evoke nationalist sentiment by making itself distinct from the colonized women even while indicating their exploitation and thus their similarity to them. Racial superiority and national pride, so integral in the habitus of empire, was often used as the basis for the demand for women's voices.<sup>34</sup>

The Pioneer Players' position appeared to be alert to these tensions but these concerns regarding empathetic allegiance and patronizing presumption were prevalent and often unresolved. Such contradictions and conflicts were evident in drama of this period otherwise taken to be liberating and pioneering. *Idle Women* satirizes the self-conscious way in which some elite groups were coming together to share their somewhat fickle interests in serious political, religious and cultural matters and at the same time exposed other values which were inattentive to the 'interrelated notions of class and race hierarchies' described by Grewal.<sup>35</sup> These contradictory values were most vividly apparent in the Pioneer Players' costume ball and this serves as a reminder that the society's theatre work was influenced by informal social networks as well as the more formal affiliations specified in the society's annual reports.

The Pioneer Players promoted itself by means of informal social practices and entertainments such as the costume ball. This particular event in March 1914 was associated with the highly influential play *Kismet*, by the American dramatist Edward Knoblauch.<sup>36</sup> *Kismet* influenced the later orientalist play *Hassan* (1923) by James Elroy Fletcher and dedicated to Richard Burton. As Claire Warden has shown, *Hassan* was described by critics 'as another example of this Oriental play genre – "another 'Kismet'"'.<sup>37</sup> It was a spectacular phenomenon giving rise to a '*Hassan* ball organised by the British Drama League' and

Warden notes Brian Singleton's observation that B. J. Simmons & Co., the costumiers for the *Kismet* production, advertised their costumes for balls: 'This was an indication of the extent to which orientalist fashion had gripped play-acting in the social sphere. Not content with observing it, theatre-goers were now being offered the opportunity of appropriating it. They could take *Kismet* home with them'.<sup>38</sup> This exploration of institutions and formations has therefore revealed that the Pioneer Players' costume ball created a social formation that facilitated the performance of such fantasies.

In the context of the Pioneer Players' involvement in women's suffrage politics, specific aspects of the orientalist dress in the *Tatler's* photographs of the Pioneer Players' 1914 costume ball suggest a further set of destabilizing associations. This concerns the politicization of trousers in the dress reform movement and the reiteration of images in the popular press of dominant women wearing 'harem' trousers. This iconography touches on complex inter-related concerns about female sexual desire. Edward Ziter has demonstrated, the spectacular productions of Augustus Harris at Drury Lane depicted British imperial power by enacting plots concerning the enslavement of British women in a harem and notes that there were profound 'contradictions inherent in theatrical orientalism'.<sup>39</sup> The Pioneer Players took 'white slavery' seriously when they staged *The Daughters of Ishmael* by Reginald Wright Kauffmann and had produced several other plays which exposed prostitution.<sup>30</sup> The appropriation of harem (and other) trousers is an emergent symbol of sexual autonomy. In the *Tatler's* photograph, Suzanne Sheldon's defiant demeanour seems to challenge both the eroticization of oriental theatrical spectacles such as *Kismet* and the subjugation of women in Britain. These costumes suggested fantasies of the implied sexual freedom and physical presence of the exotic body and at the same time occluded slavery and the diverse experiences of women.



The Pioneer Players' 1914 costume ball asserts the perceived autonomy of the women of the harem and their performability by white Western middle-class women. It has been established by Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell (1994) that in the visual cultural battle for women's enfranchisement, women's clothing was a site of political conflict and also a focus for political campaigning.<sup>41</sup> This cultural warfare for women's enfranchisement was fought out in popular picture postcards, such as those produced by Donald McGill or Bamforth, where the domineering white British woman was sometimes depicted in harem trousers, signifying gender trouble at home which was attributable to pernicious foreign ideas as well as cross-dressing (Fig. 2) However, the orientalist costume which had become a fashion also fed the anti-suffrage argument that the political campaign for women's enfranchisement signified the collapse of sexual mores and degeneracy, as well as modernizing the panic over a 'petticoat' government'.<sup>42</sup> In the context of the movement for free love, sexual experimentation and the politicization of single motherhood, the appropriation of the harem trousers fashion was one further act of defiance.

Thus the Pioneer Players' costume ball, so indebted to *Kismet*, demonstrates a subversive confidence; through their theatrical productions and the related social events, the members gained sufficient power to articulate their demands for equality and social change. Manifestoes and mission statements, where they exist, sometimes fail to capture the breadth of activities of a cultural organization. It is the peripheral activities, the social interactions and the shared jokes which prove to be indirectly illuminating. The audience is interpellated in *Idle Women* to associate the Pioneer Players with activity rather than idleness, with a serious, politically committed and credible position as distinguishable from the faddish, self-indulgent and inauthentic practices portrayed in this play. It is made clear that a superficial engagement with political and social reforms is to be derided. *Idle Women* acknowledges the attraction posed by the exotic and the oriental. The *Tatler's* photographic records of the Pioneer

Players' costume ball suggest that the informal performance of the exotic body also provided opportunities off-stage to experiment with different modes of self-presentation, freed from conventional costume and associated with Futurism.<sup>43</sup> Although the orientalist fashion usually figures an indulgence in the imaginative fantasies associated with the imperialist subject, here other meanings are at play. In the association with the Pioneer Players society, whose productions were often linked by reviewers with the aesthetic of the Russian Ballet,<sup>44</sup> this unorthodox dress is appropriated for political purposes. The freedom claimed in dress symbolized the demand for other freedoms, with related costs and implications but the engagement with orientalism exposes some of the political tensions at work within the 'free theatre'.

## References

1. Raymond Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 130.
2. This is demonstrated extensively in women's suffrage literature; see, for instance, Glenda Norquay (ed.) *Voices and Votes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Carolyn Christenson Nelson (ed.) *Literature of the Women's Suffrage Campaign in England* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004).
3. See Katharine Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869-1947): Dramatic Lives* (London: Cassell, 1998); Katharine Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players 1911-25* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Katharine Cockin, *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017).
4. Raymond Williams, *Culture*, (London: Fontana, 1981), 35.

5. Raymond Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 148-69.
6. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, 'Modernism and Theatrical Performance', *Modernist Cultures*, I, no. 1 (2005): 59-68; Marvin Carlson, 'Negotiating Theatrical Modernism in the Arab World', *Theatre Journal*, 65 (2013): 523-35.
7. George Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Heartbreak House*, in *Prefaces by Bernard Shaw* (London: Constable, 1934), 395.
8. Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction', 155.
9. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality may offer a new way of considering the complexities of Williams' notion of the 'fraction'.
10. In modernism and twentieth-century literary history, Craig and her partners have appeared briefly in various studies; for innovative research in mapping networks of 'companionate friendships', see Catherine Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945: Professional Work and Friendship* (London: Routledge, 2006).
11. Alan Sinfield has discussed the work of Edith Craig and Christopher St John with the Pioneer Players, AFL and Women's Writers' Suffrage League: 'Probably this militantly feminist work translated, for some women, into a sense that these theatres were lesbian space'; Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 11-12.
12. Raymond Williams defines the 'dominant, residual and emergent' and associates the 'emergent' with the 'coming to consciousness of a new class'; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 124. Women's suffrage literature resembles this process but signifies a coalition of women and men advocating enfranchisement for a sector of the female middle class defined broadly as 'women' and arguing for this political change in ways which were conflicted. In these

respects, this cultural phenomenon exemplifies the complex and dynamic aspects of cultural practices theorized by Williams.

13. Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment', 144.
14. Several presidents of the actors' trade union, Equity, were former members of the Pioneer Players: Godfrey Tearle (1884-1953) president of Equity 1932-40, knighted in 1951; Felix Aylmer OBE (1889-1979) president 1949/50-69. A member of the Pioneer Players executive, the Hon. Gabrielle Enthoven, led the campaign in 1911 for a National Museum of Theatre Arts and in 1924 donated her own theatre collection to the V&A. This formed the basis for the later Theatre Museum, the UK's national museum of the performing arts, founded in 1987 and closed in 2007; see Kate Dorney, 'Excavating Enthoven: Investigating a Life of Stuff', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 34, no. 2 (2014), 115-125.
15. The Theatrical Ladies Guild (TLG), a charitable organization founded in 1891, became known especially for the support of female performers with children, with regular sewing bees to make baby clothes; see Katharine Cockin, 'Emily Courtier-Dutton, née Claremont (Kittie Carson)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2004). For a discussion of the extensive charitable work led by female performers in London including the TLG, see Catherine Hindson, *London's West End Actresses and the Origins of Celebrity Charity, 1880-1920* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2016).
16. Some insights from the letters of Ellen Terry, one of the TLG's key patrons, suggest that it was supporting women who were probably unmarried mothers. Terry financially supported the Guild and also appears to have co-ordinated the donation of baby clothes. Having had her two children outside marriage, Terry took the situation of unmarried mothers sufficiently seriously to include her views in a letter to George

- Bernard Shaw. She provided charitable support by means of making available her own country cottage for women resting from stagework and she supported the unmarried mothers of her own grandchildren both emotionally and financially. See Ellen Terry letter to Margaret Alston, 14 March [1905]; letter 1399, in Katharine Cockin (ed.) *The Collected Letters of Ellen Terry, Volume 5* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 12-13 (hereafter *CLET*). Ellen Terry annotated a press cutting from the *Daily Telegraph* concerning the court case of Louisa James; Ellen Terry letter to George Bernard Shaw, 31 May 1899; letter 997 in Cockin, *CLET*, Volume 4.
17. Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, (London: Virago, 1981).
  18. Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 127.
  19. See Cockin, *Women and Theatre*, 166-87; Cockin, *Edith Craig*, Chapters 4 and 5.
  20. Performed at the Royal Court in 1907 and broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in September 2013.
  21. 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social being, but their social being which determines their consciousness'; Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).
  22. Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment', 140.
  23. Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment', 141.
  24. Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment', 140.
  25. See Claire Warden, *British Avant Garde Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Steve Nicholson, *British Theatre and the Red Peril* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).
  26. See for instance, Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality 1885-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

27. Magdalen Ponsonby's father was Major-General Sir Henry Ponsonby, Privy Purse and Private Secretary to Queen Victoria (1870-1895). Magdalen Ponsonby edited the memoir, diary and letters of her mother, Mary Ponsonby, (1927), which demonstrate that Magdalen was spoken of fondly in letters by Queen Victoria and that she was a guest at Princess Victoria's wedding.
28. Besant formed the International Order of the Star in the East and enlisted supporters at a meeting of the Theosophical Society, including Lady Emily Lutyens, Countess de La Warr and the wealthy American, Mary Dodge; Mary Lutyens, *The Life and Death of Krishnamurti* (London: Rider 1990), 14. However, another model for the character of Tanno Matsuri may have been Inayat Khan (1882-1927), a musician, later associated with the founding of Sufism, who first visited Britain in 1910. Khan's writings were published by the Theosophical Society in 1914 and his musical performances were advertised in the Pioneer Players' play programmes.
29. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, (London: Vintage 1996), 283.
30. See Adrian Stephen, *The Dreadnought Hoax*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1983).
31. The relevant captions are: 'Miss Suzanne Sheldon, In a "Kismet" costume Miss Sheldon is the wife of Mr Henry Ainley the popular actor'; 'Miss Lily Brayton and Mr Warlock. Miss Lily Brayton is now playing in the revival of "Kismet" with her husband at the Globe Theatre'; 'Miss Cicely Hamilton. And an "Arab" friend', Miss Hamilton is the well-known novelist and playwright. She is wearing a Futurist dress. Note the "hair"; 'Miss Marjorie Russell. In a beautiful Oriental—or is it a Futurist?—dress', which she wore at the Mi-Careme Ball'; 'The Pioneer Players' Mi-Careme Ball', *The Tatler*, (March 1914) 329. 'Mi-Careme' refers to the Medieval tradition of a carnival celebration at mid-lent in the Christian calendar.

32. Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 74-6; 195.
33. Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 66.
34. Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 67.
35. Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 67.
36. Edward Knoblauch (later Knoblock) was George Pierce Baker's student at Harvard University. *Kismet* was produced by Charles Frohmann at Baker's New Theatre; Mark Hodin, "'It did not sound like a Professor's speech': George Pierce Baker, and the Market for Academic Rhetoric", *Theatre Survey*, 46, no. 2 (2005), 225-46.
37. Claire Warden, 'Hassan: Iraq on the British Stage', *Theatre Notebook*, 66, no. 3 (2012), 166.
38. Brian Singleton, *Oscar Asche, Orientalism and British Musical Comedy* (London: Praeger 2004), 83.
39. Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, 195.
40. This strand of the Pioneer Players' productions is examined in detail in Cockin, *Women and Theatre*, Ch. 5 and Cockin, *Edith Craig*, 131-3.
41. There is an extensive body of popular postcards in this period depicting dominant women wearing trousers including those specifically depicted as relating to the 'harem' exemplified by Figure Two. See also Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre & Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994). The Pioneer Players' production of Edith Lyttelton's *The Thumbscrew* explored sweated labour of women and children in the clothing industry and was supported by the National Anti-Sweating League; see letter from J. J. Mallon to Mrs

[Edith] Lyttelton, 3 Dec 1912; EC-B235; EC-N357; and EC-H122; the National Trust's Ellen Terry and Edith Craig Archive on loan at the British Library.

42. See Laurence Housman, 'The Petticoat Government', *The Contemporary Review*, 1 July (1913), 663-72, for a witty analysis of the anti-suffragists' claim for 'female tyranny of a rather petty kind' (671).
43. Two of the costumes photographed by *The Tatler* were described in the captions as 'Futurist'. C. R. W. Nevinson (1889-1946), the son of Margaret Wynne Nevinson the Pioneer Players dramatist, was one of the leading Futurist artists. Three months after the Pioneer Players' costume ball, on 7 June 1914, Nevinson co-authored the sensational manifesto, *Vital English Art*, with Filippo Marinetti.
44. See Cockin, *Edith Craig*, 143-7.